

Putting Veterans Funding First Act of 2013 (H.R. 813)

Budget Reforms and Advance Funding for VA's Entire Discretionary Budget

BACKGROUND

On October 22, 2009, President Obama signed the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act (H.R.1016) into law. Rep. Mike Michaud was a cosponsor of the bill and pushed for its passage. This bipartisan bill has ensured timely funding for veterans' health care programs, which represent approximately 86 percent of the overall Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) discretionary budget. This advanced appropriation provides the VA with up to a year to plan how to deliver the most efficient and effective care to an increasing number of veterans with increasingly complex medical conditions. The bill was a direct result of uneven budget cycles and funding shortfalls that contributed to the rationing of VA health care and the inability of the VA to properly plan from year-to-year.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN'S IMPACT ON VETERANS

Over 5.2 million veterans, survivors and other beneficiaries did not know when, how, or if they would get the benefits and services they earned. Important VA functions, such as claims processors, medical research, the VA cemeteries, and VA information technology were all affected by the shutdown. Progress on reducing the claims backlog was also slowed, with 1,400 veterans a day not getting a decision on their disability status.

The only VA service not at risk during the shutdown was veterans' health care. VA health care, funded with advance appropriations, was not affected by the lapse in appropriations. All VA medical facilities were open and operating as normal. Veterans' health was not put at risk because VA medical care had a budget in place on October 1 as a result of advance appropriations.

A COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTION—the “Putting Veterans Funding First Act” (H.R. 813)

Washington's brinksmanship cannot be allowed to threaten the benefits and services we owe to our veterans. That's why the House Veterans' Affairs Committee approved the “Putting Veterans Funding First Act,” a bill introduced by Ranking Member Michaud and Chairman Jeff Miller that requires Congress to fund the VA's remaining discretionary budget accounts a year ahead of schedule, ensuring that all VA services will have timely and predictable funding and be protected from future congressional budget battles. Equally important, the bill reforms the manner in which VA determines and plans for benefits and services by requiring the VA to periodically review and assess veteran needs, identify a plan of action to meet these changing needs, and align its resource requirements with its current, and future, operations.

Taken together, these changes represent major reform. They not only make sure VA's entire discretionary budget is provided in advance, but they require more comprehensive, longer-term planning. This is good for taxpayers and, more importantly, means that the current and future needs of veterans will be thoroughly planned and budgeted for moving forward. Even though our overseas conflicts may be winding down, the needs of our veterans will continue for decades to come.

On August 1, 2013, the “Putting Veterans Funding First Act,” as amended, was unanimously passed by the House Veterans' Affairs Committee and favorably reported to the House. Members of the committee are currently urging Speaker Boehner to hold a vote on this important bill, which is strongly supported by all major veterans' service organizations.